Dead electronics going to waste

Millions of tons of used devices pose threat to environment

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WASHINGTON - In today's high-tech era, the temptation for upgrades is everywhere: a slimmer cell phone, a sleeker desktop, a sportier BlackBerry.

But the consequences of the constant quest for better gadgetry are piling up. Every time last year's monitor is chucked, it becomes a piece of potentially hazardous waste.

More than three years after federal and industry officials began to talk about how to cope with the "e-waste" problem, the situation has only deteriorated. Americans dispose of 2 million tons of electronic products a year -- including 50 million computers and 130 million cell phones -- and by 2010, the nation will be discarding 400 million electronic units annually, according to the International Association of Electronics Recyclers.

Environmentalists say the rising tide of electronic waste is slowly degrading in landfills and rivers here and abroad, posing a serious threat to water and air. Computers, televisions and other advanced devices contain neurotoxins and carcinogens such as lead and beryllium metal that are leaching into waterways and entering the air through burning or dust.

With little notice, e-waste has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the country's solid waste stream, and technology products now account for as much as 40 percent of the lead in U.S. landfills, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

'Next extension of pollution prevention'

For years, Americans were able to ship discarded computers and televisions to China, where they were dismantled for scrap. But with an escalating mountain of electronics waste threatening to overwhelm the country's storage and disposal capacity, regulators and manufacturers are struggling to devise a comprehensive solution to one of the nation's newest environmental dilemmas.

"Here we recognize it as a problem, and a number of states do," as well, said Thomas Dunne, acting assistant administrator for EPA's office of solid waste and emergency response, who last month ordered his deputies to craft a broad e-waste recycling strategy. "This is the next extension of pollution prevention."

Still, no one is quite ready to take on the task of managing the high-tech refuse that U.S. consumers are jettisoning with abandon. Federal regulators have asked the industry to devise a voluntary system to cope with the problem, but manufacturers are bickering over how to pay for it. In the meantime, a patchwork of state regulations has emerged, as officials from Maine to California seek to impose tougher rules on high-tech producers.

Activists say this haphazard approach to regulation is not enough. They say it fails to protect Americans from potential danger and encourages recyclers to ship e-waste to Asia, where it leaches into waterways and affects the health of low-wage workers. The United States is the only developed country not to have ratified the Basel Convention, an international treaty that took effect in 1992 and controls the export of hazardous waste.

"There's a real electronics-waste crisis," said Basel Action Network coordinator Jim Puckett, whose group monitors the global toxic waste trade. "The U.S. just looks the other way as we use these cheap and dirty dumping grounds."

Manufacturers split on plan

Federal officials spent several years working with industry trying to develop a nationwide plan, but e-waste recycling remains expensive, and manufacturers are split on whether to eat the costs or pass them on to consumers as a surcharge with each purchase.

"They came to a consensus about what the system would look like, but they couldn't come to an agreement on how to pay for it," said Katharine Osdoba, an EPA staff member who participated in the talks.

Dunne, who recently told a group of recyclers and manufacturers that he sees himself as "more of a facilitator and less of a regulator," said in an interview he has no plans to pursue new rules or legislation. Instead, he has asked his staff to develop a voluntary plan. EPA issued nonbinding guidelines in March on electronic-waste management, and it has backed pilot programs under which such retailers as Staples, Office Depot and Good Guys in Australia agree to recycle electronics at no charge for several weeks at a time.

Staples, which recycled about 210,000 pounds of high-tech trash last year, now takes back electronics such as cell phones, pagers, toner cartridges and hand-held devices at any time, no matter where they were purchased. The company's vice president for environmental affairs, Mark Buckley, said his firm recognizes this is "a mounting problem, and we want to come up with a creative solution." But Buckley added that Staples will not be able "to come up with a total solution" on its own, especially in light of the costs of recycling.

The federal government disposes of 10,000 computers a week, and officials say they are focused on more incremental steps to deal with their contribution to the problem. In mid-December EPA awarded eight contracts of about $1 million each aimed at helping federal agencies dispose of electronic equipment without hurting the environment. The Dec. 29 release noted "this complex waste stream poses challenging management issues and potential liability concerns for federal facilities."

Advocates such as Ted Smith, senior strategist for the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, said federal officials could be doing more to make electronics more environmentally benign. The European Union has ordered the phaseout of several toxins from electronic products by the summer of 2006, and by this summer electronic manufacturers must establish a system of recycling hazardous products when they become outdated.

California was the first state to adopt comprehensive e-waste rules; as of Jan. 1 the state's computer and TV retailers must charge a disposal fee of $6 to $10 to pay for recycling these products once they are no longer useful. Maine followed with a somewhat similar approach: by the end of the year it will make producers responsible for taking back and disposing safely of obsolete electronics.

But most federal officials are reluctant to take on the electronics industry, Smith said: "We're talking about some very powerful interests who have made it very clear they don't want to do any more than they're required to."

Some high-tech producers are adopting stricter disposal practices on their own: Hewlett-Packard Development Co. has pledged not to ship its waste overseas, and Dell Inc. has agreed not to export old computers, use prison labor to dismantle them or dump them in landfills. Both Hewlett-Packard and IBM will recycle any personal computer for a fee of $13 to $34; several recyclers said dismantling a unit in an environmentally sound manner costs from $4 to $20.

These firms are turning to environmentally sensitive recyclers such as RetroBox, a Columbus, Ohio, company that has doubled in size each year since it was founded seven years ago. RetroBox -- headed by a cheerful Harvard Business School graduate named Stampp Corbin, who sees America's high-tech rejects as a healthy revenue stream -- assures its customers that it will recycle their old electronics and then give them 70 percent of his profits, while simultaneously wiping any confidential business or personal data out of old hard drives.

Corbin, who has 85 employees, expects his profits to double by the end of 2005. Recycling is the only option companies have, he said, "unless we want to take a small country in the world and make it into an e-waste landfill."

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